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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000135

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL MEETING WITH PRESIDENTIAL  
CANDIDATE AQUINO

REF: A. MANILA 00060 (AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL WITH  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE GILBERTO TEODORO)  
[1](#)B. MANILA 02290 (SENATOR VILLAR GOES ON THE  
OFFENSIVE IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The Ambassador hosted a cordial, hour-long coffee at the Residence January 21 with Liberal Party presidential candidate Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III and his vice presidential running mate, Senator Manuel A. "Mar" Roxas. Clearly more relaxed and self-possessed than in previous encounters, Senator Aquino appeared to have emerged from the shadow of the towering political legacy of his parents, former President Corazon Aquino and political martyr Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. Still, "Senator Noynoy" seemed more at ease trading quips with his running mate or reminiscing about his parents than in describing his policy views, which he delineated more in negative terms )-overcoming the corruption and cronyism of the Arroyo administration ) than in a positive vision of where he wanted to take the Philippines. Asked to describe his campaign strategy, he dwelled on the need to keep political opponents from stealing the election (and speculating whether his supporters should take to the streets if results were manipulated) rather than laying out a strategy for building on his current leading position in the polls. The Ambassador stressed the importance of a free and fair election to the international credibility of the Philippines and outlined important bilateral issues, including additional humanitarian relief, joint military exercises and an increase in Peace Corps volunteers. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

[1](#)2. (C) Previous contacts with Senator Aquino, often accompanying his mother, former President Cory Aquino, left the impression of a diffident, unassertive man continuing a political tradition handed on by his parents but not carving out his own legacy. The outpouring of national affection and grief last summer over the death of his mother thrust him into the political limelight, however, and after several weeks of apparent uncertainty whether he should take up his parents' mantle, he emerged from a personal retreat apparently determined to accept the call of his millions of new supporters and seek the presidency.

NEW-FOUND CONFIDENCE  
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[1](#)3. (C) That more confident, self-assured persona was very much on display at the Residence during a relaxed, hour-long coffee with the Ambassador. Not only was Senator Aquino completely at ease with his running mate, Senator Roxas, a longtime Senate colleague, but remained the dominant interlocutor throughout the discussion, despite Senator Roxas' more ebullient personality. Senator Aquino joked

several times about his very assertive sister, TV personality Kris Aquino, noting how she had chosen his new glasses for him, and remarked wryly about working with several of his more controversial Senate colleagues, one of whom led a coup attempt in 1987 that left Senator Aquino severely wounded.

#### CLEAN ELECTIONS VITAL FOR INTERNATIONAL CREDIBILITY

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¶4. (C) The Ambassador lauded Senator Aquino's courageous demeanor throughout the demanding days of his mother's wake, funeral mass and hours-long funeral procession last summer, and in particular his political maturity in gracefully receiving both President Arroyo and the children of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, bitter political foes of the Aquino family. Such magnanimity was rare in Philippine politics, but was needed if the country's political wounds were ever to heal, the Ambassador noted. Equally important, it was vital that the upcoming election be free, fair and transparent; a failed or disputed election would seriously damage the Philippines, international reputation.

#### RUNNING AGAINST ARROYO

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¶5. (C) Senator Aquino agreed that such reconciliation was necessary, though he quipped that he asked his sisters if any of them would like to meet the President or Marcos children in his stead. And in spite of the momentary time-out from politics during the funeral, Senator Aquino made it clear that he was fully prepared to carry out a tough campaign for

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the presidency, with the shortcomings of the current administration as his key platform.

¶6. (C) Senator Aquino explained that he had just come from addressing an overflow crowd at the Makati Business Club, a key business group staunchly opposed to President Arroyo. Aquino joked that he wanted to tell the crowd, "Just send checks and check my website for my speech," but he recognized the importance of reaching out personally to business and political groups throughout the country. In that vein, he would be heading to Cebu January 22 to address that city's main business club.

#### SHORT ON POLICY PLANKS

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¶7. (C) Unlike other major presidential candidates whom the Ambassador has met recently, like Senator Manuel "Manny" Villar and former Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro (reftels), Senator Aquino was vague on specific policies he would pursue if he won office. Queried for his views on issues like Mindanao, the economy and foreign policy, Senator Aquino did not provide any clear policy proposals, but stressed the importance of clearing up the legacy of corruption and cronyism of the Arroyo administration. The only policy concern he mentioned specifically was the dismal state of Philippine education, as he noted a recent UN report that said the Philippines lagged behind Zambia and Tanzania in universal education. However, he did not outline any plans to reverse the decline.

#### CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR VOTE RIGGING

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¶8. (C) Similarly, when questioned about his campaign strategy for maintaining and building on his current front-runner status in all presidential polls, Senator Aquino focused on the need to prevent efforts by opposing political forces to manipulate election results rather than on how he would use media or personal appearances to reach out to the millions of lower-class voters who would be the decisive voices in the election. He suggested that he would deploy many of his 30,000 election volunteers around the country to oversee the

voting. Somewhat more disturbingly, he said he was already giving thought to how his party would need to react to vote rigging if he did not win the election, wondering aloud if it would be necessary to take to the streets to reverse a perceived fraudulent election.

#### OLD WOUNDS

19. (C) Where Senator Aquino was most comfortable was in talking about the past )- parents and family, the 1987 coup attempt, the bloody Huk rebellion. Speaking wistfully about his parents, he voiced regret that his mother had not recorded a narrative for visitors to the Aquino family library in Tarlac. For his father, Aquino recalled that Ninoy Aquino walked at a rapid clip, so that others had to jog to keep up. Turning to the coup attempt, he said that when he and his 5 security escorts were attacked by 95 rebellious soldiers, he had suffered serious wounds to his left arm and neck, and a bullet was still lodged near his carotid artery; all but one of his escorts was killed. He then kept his wounds secret from his mother for four hours, so she could concentrate on countering the coup. Ironically, one of the key plotters, Gregorio Honasan, was now a colleague in the Senate.

#### CONTINUING U.S. POLICY PROGRAMS

10. (C) The Ambassador briefed the two Senators on her impending departure from post, saying that her designated successor was awaiting confirmation from the Senate, and that they should feel free to reach out to the Charge d'Affaires if they had any questions or concerns. She also briefed them on some key upcoming bilateral events, including humanitarian relief carried out by the Air Force hospital plane Pacific Angel, the annual Balikatan military exercises, progress toward a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact and a planned doubling of Peace Corps volunteers in the Philippines.

KENNEY